

Records Storage

Introduction

It is neither prudent nor possible to keep every record created or received within the confines of most offices. Office space should contain only those records necessary for conducting daily business effectively. Alternative methods of storage are needed for the maintenance of records which must be kept for administrative, legal or fiscal reasons, but are not referred to regularly — i.e., semi-current or inactive records. This is the work of a records storage center and its staff.

The frequency of record use by an office determines its activity, and consequently its storage and retrieval requirements. Determining reference rates is a key task in developing plans for records storage. This information is usually generated by a records inventory.

For records management purposes there are two definitions of records activity:

1. **Current or active records** — reference rates are greater than one per month per cubic foot.
2. **Semi-current or inactive records** — reference rates are less than one per month per cubic foot.

In addition to determining the rates of reference, measuring the volume of record holdings is essential for both current and future space requirements. It should be noted that for these purposes, approximate measurement is sufficient. A standard legal file drawer contains about two cubic feet of records, and fractions less than half a cubic foot are designated as “minimal” (see "Table of Volumes" at end of this chapter).

Records Storage Objectives

Low-cost maintenance and protection of semi-current records is the goal of records storage techniques. When used as part of a comprehensive records management program for local government government, a records center provides:

1. Orderly periodic transfer and storage of records which must be retained for limited retention periods but have low reference rates,
2. Standards for indexing, transferring and controlling semi-current records, and
3. Fast, efficient retrieval services, generally with a turnaround time of 24 hours or less from receipt of reference request to delivery of records requested.

By using a records storage center, a local government government will be able to save thousands of dollars per year, chiefly through economies in space and equipment. For example, when records are housed in office space in standard five drawer vertical file cabinets, one square foot of storage space is needed for each cubic foot of records. (With these cabinets, reference space requires an additional square foot for each cubic foot of records.) When records are stored on steel shelves in a records center, that ratio is increased to a minimum of five cubic feet of records to each square foot of floor space. Space economy is further increased when costs for inexpensive “warehouse” storage are compared with expenses for prime office space.

Records Storage Process

Primary Concerns

Use of a records storage center provides two essential services for county and municipal agencies and authorities:

1. The first service is protection against damage or destruction from:

- a. **Fire** — Losses from accidental fire or arson are minimized by prohibiting smoking and segregating combustible materials. Additionally, fire codes may require installation of automatic sprinklers, smoke detection systems, fire doors and walls, and electrical wiring in metal conduit. General periodic building and fire inspections are also recommended.

Unlike the usual, slapdash storage, a properly-run records storage center contains only semi-current records, not the common mix of active and inactive records in varying degrees of anonymity, used office furniture, etc.

- b. **Pests, vermin and pollution** — The organic substances in leather, pastes and paper are a good source of food for vermin. Accumulated dust and debris provide a haven for the growth of insects and mold. Prevention measures depend upon the nature of the pestilence and should include keeping the building clean, as well as conducting periodic exterminations and installing filtration for insects and fungus spores, if needed.

A properly run records storage center is a clean, well-kept facility, in which records are repeatedly spot-checked during the process of accommodating reference requests.

- c. **Temperature and Humidity** — Extreme fluctuations of temperature and humidity will hasten records deterioration. Periodic inspections of the storage facility should include monitoring for plumbing leaks, standing water and excess humidity. Records storage boxes should be examined randomly for mold, infestation, or other signs of deterioration.

A properly run records storage center provides constant office-type temperature and

humidity and is environmentally monitored.

2. The second service is the safeguarding of privacy and security:

- a. **Access Authorization** — Semi-current records stored in a records storage center are the property of their office of origin. Only physical custody is transferred to the storage facility, and permission from the originating agency is required before anyone can see the records. A form listing persons to whom records may be released, such as the division's "Records Center Access Authorization Form" must be filed by appropriate officials before records center staff will comply with a reference request.
- b. **Theft Prevention** — Semi-current records vary in their accessibility. Some records are sensitive and highly confidential. Special means of securing these records, such as the installation of burglar alarms or other intrusion detection systems may be necessary. Other means of preventing burglary losses include installing separate locks on all doors to the storage area, monitoring access through staff supervision, and employing uniformed guards if necessary.

A properly run records storage center is usually a guarded building with strictly enforced access procedures described above.

Records Transfer

The identification of semi-current records held by government offices is another benefit of having conducted a record series inventory. The inventory process identifies record holdings and their inclusive dates, volumes and rates of activity, thereby making possible the establishment and implementation of retention schedules. Retention schedules provide the basis for semi-current records storage and allow for ease of legal disposition.

Storage Criteria

To store records at a records storage center, records must:

1. Appear on an approved Records Retention Schedule,
2. Be scheduled for a minimum of one year storage,
3. Be properly identified and documented for transfer and reference,
4. Be properly packed in standard, 1 cubic foot records storage boxes, and
5. Have a specific date (month and year) when disposition will take place.

The "Records Storage Center Criteria and Instructions for Transfer of Records" contains this and other information, including a item-by-item guide to completing an actual records transfer request, and may be used as a model for a county or municipal form.

Certainly, not all records should be transferred to storage. Reference rates, retention periods and storage costs are prime factors in determining the appropriateness of semi-current storage. Current records must remain in office space because they are crucial to daily business, with only one prior years' records normally needed for efficient operations. Additionally, some semi-current records should be kept in office space because volumes are minimal and transfer would be too costly, or because paper source documents are microfilmed.

Additional analysis of records targeted for transfer to local government records centers is often suggested to determine whether microfilming should be used instead of semi-current storage. Factors included in such an analysis are:

1. Length of retention period,
2. Volume and access rates,
3. Security and preservation considerations, and
4. Cost effectiveness.

In all cases, division analysts are available to help study potential storage or filming applications.

Because their storage requirements are considerably more complex, permanent records are never eligible for transfer to a records storage center. Permanent records should be placed in an archives as soon as they become inactive in their agency of origin (see "Archives" chapter). In counties where economic constraints require a single facility to house semi-current and permanent records, permanent records should be segregated to accommodate a higher degree of environmental control.

Preparation for Transfer

Semi-current record series are packed in standard records cartons in the order in which they were filed in their office of origin. To make reference easier, approximately one and one-half (1 1/2) inches of space should be left in every box. All of the records, whether letter or legal size, should be packed parallel to the long (15 inch) side of the carton so they will be perpendicular to the front of the shelf when stored. In case of fire, this packing method prevents records from falling out of the boxes and feeding flames. Additionally, records that are packed correctly may survive a fire with only minimal singeing of edges.

At the time the records are packed, a "Records Transfer Request" form should be used to itemize the contents of each box. This serves as both documentation of the transfer to a records storage center and later as an index for physically locating specific records for reference.

Each storage box must be labeled by the originating agency. In a properly run records storage center, the Records Transfer form be submitted prior to physical transfer of the records to permit processing. Once received, box numbers assigned by the originating agency become a secondary index. In an informal records storage system, the same form should be used with a staff member from the originating agency completing all the steps.

Receipt by the Records Center

Responsibility for physically moving records from their offices of origin to a records storage center belongs to the records center staff, provided that appropriate prerequisites have been met, and procedures have been consistently followed. Once records arrive at the records center, the general contents are checked against the records transfer list to ensure that records listed were received.

Records center staff provides a final label for each box with an assigned physical location in the records center along with the disposition date. Boxes are then placed in appropriate shelf spaces. The new label replaces the preliminary label of the originating agency. Records center location numbers are added to the records transfer list for each box and a copy of this amended list is returned to the agency. Once the agency receives the list, it becomes a receipt of the successful transfer, as well as an index when specific records are needed. It should also be noted that the disposition dates of records are checked for accuracy by records storage staff at the time of the receipt of a transfer request.

Unlike a central file room which is essentially a self-service operation, a records center enjoys a staff which is responsible for overseeing procedures and providing services. The decision to implement a formal system is made by considering the costs of implementing and maintaining the system versus the cost benefits of storing semi-current records properly. A records center staff of trained, experienced technicians perform a range of services including:

1. Records pick-up from agency or authority premises,
2. Records preparation (i.e., preparing records for storage in a records center, including indexing, preferably on an automated storage system),
3. Retrieval and reference for records stored in a county or municipal records center (restricted to authorized agency representatives only), and
4. Destruction of records whose retention periods have expired, after review and approval by appropriate agency or authority officials.

Although less formal arrangements may not inspire the confidence needed by various officials to use the system to full advantage, if it is economically necessary to scale down a records storage operation, at the very minimum, storage policies and procedures should be published and disseminated to avoid confusion and demonstrate management support for storage initiatives.

Reference Services

Records storage centers generally provide reference services which include both retrieval and delivery of records to authorized officials who request them. Information may be relayed by telephone, or photocopies of a few pages may be mailed or faxed. Additionally, most off-site centers include reference rooms where records may be examined in person. Photocopiers are also standard equipment since an authorized official may need to see a particular record but prefers the security of leaving original documents in storage.

A records center has physical custody and is responsible for maintenance and protection against damage or unauthorized access. The transferring office retains legal custody of its own records

and controls use and access. That office must therefore regularly supply and update a list of authorized employees who may make reference requests. No other individuals are given information about the records in storage. It is the duty of records center staff to determine if an individual is authorized before releasing any information.

Whenever a file is removed from the storage center, an “out” slip (or a carbon of the “Request for Reference Services,” or some similar control device) is entered in its place to mark:

1. Records removed,
2. Date of removal, and
3. Official to whom records have been delivered.

This system documents each reference request and tracks withdrawn records. When records are returned to their locations in the records center, the “out” slip is removed and amended by indicating the date of return to the file. It is a virtual certainty that such care is very seldom given to those records that are not stored in this fashion.

Disposal Procedure

Records center staff periodically reviews box transfer lists to determine if disposition dates are imminent or if any records are being held beyond their retention periods. Records storage staff also checks current records retention schedules to determine if they have been updated and if an item in storage is affected by the change. Disposition dates of series held in storage are also verified.

From information gathered during these reviews, the staff can send notices to appropriate agencies and authorities describing the cartons of records eligible for destruction, circling the items on photocopies of the original transfer request and providing a partially filled-out, four part “Request and Authorization for Records Disposal” form.

The office of origin need simply verify which records are earmarked for destruction, provide appropriate signatures, and remove items it considers as necessary for continuing business despite expiration of retention. After the signed, intact disposal request is sent to the division and the division grants authorization, targeted records may be removed from semi-current storage to be destroyed. A record center's files, as well as those of the office which had custody of the records, are updated to reflect changes in record holdings.

Records center staff arrange for the destruction of such records in accordance with state environmental restrictions with special care taken in those instances where confidential or sensitive records are being handled to prevent the release of their contents to unauthorized individuals or agencies. This procedure involves a certification by vendors that records picked up will be destroyed or recycled in accordance with the law.

Developing Storage Options

There are five basic approaches to developing facilities to house semicurrent records:

1. **Design and construct** a new building for the purpose,
2. **Convert** an existing building,
3. **Retrofit** an area within an existing building,
4. **Lease** "common" storage space from a commercial storage facility, or
5. **Contract** a service company which specializes in the storage, maintenance and retrieval of semicurrent records.

Choice of an approach is not only determined by the total volume of records and estimating future growth of active files, but also after careful consideration of costs versus cost avoidance benefits, budgetary levels, design and operational factors. Seemingly expensive options such as new construction often become economically justifiable if two or more public entities which require buildings can be compatibly combined. In some areas of the country, archival and records management services are provided by regional facilities which serve several municipalities and counties.

Division analysts are available to aid counties with needs assessments for semi-current storage systems, and to provide sources of comparative data. Advice is always available, either officially or on an informal basis as questions arise.

New Construction

General Considerations

A building specifically designed and constructed for use as a records storage center provides the best use of space for optimum control over records. The National Archives and Records Service has published specifications and standards for its facilities (Federal Archives and Records Center Facility Standards, General Services Administration, 1976).

A building constructed for semi-current records storage must be located within a reasonable distance from most of the offices it serves for ease of transfer and reference. The building should be designed to guard against dangers such as fire and flooding, as well as to ensure protection against unauthorized access and hazards such as insects, vermin, and extreme humidity and temperature fluctuations.

Facility size is determined by the space needed to accommodate existing semi-current record holdings and to adequately provide for future expansion. In addition to area needed for storage itself, space is required for offices, receipt and processing of records, on-site reference, and appropriate employee service areas. It is extremely important to ensure that the floor of the building

is capable of safely carrying the weight to records, shelving and equipment, and people. The National Archives and Records Service recommends a minimum live floor load of 300 pounds per square foot, with 100 pounds per square foot minimum for office areas.

The facility must be well-lighted and adequately ventilated, with windows kept to a minimum or covered to protect records from sunlight. Fluorescent lighting is preferred to avoid glare, shadows and extreme contrasts. Lighting fixtures should be placed high enough so they do not interfere with loading and unloading of shelves.

Loading docks for receiving records and dock leveler plates to accommodate a variety of trucks are recommended. Other construction options include separate receiving and disposal areas to minimize the risk of destroying inappropriate records.

Shelving

When circumstances permit, a records storage center should be limited to one level. The traditional records center shelving is 14 feet high and accessed by rolling ladders. With this configuration, an average ratio of five cubic feet of records per square foot of floor space can be achieved. If no ladders are used, shelving height is limited to 7 feet-6 inches to permit access. This limits storage density advantages.

Where open land is unavailable, records storage centers have been built using multi-level shelving configurations. Up to three levels of 7- 8 foot shelves are separated by catwalks. Access to records is made easy with the use of stairs, elevators or hydraulic lift devices. Multi-level shelving arrangements can attain ratios of up to nine cubic feet of records per square foot of space.

Standard steel shelves measure 42 inches by 30 inches and accommodate six standard cardboard record cartons which are each 12 inches wide, 15 inches long, and 10 inches high, holding an approximate volume of one cubic foot each. Shelves are arranged either in single rows with all cartons facing an aisle, or double rows with only front cartons on each shelf facing an aisle. The double row, or back-to-back arrangement, makes better use of floor space while maintaining accessibility.

Usually, there is only one main aisle, which should be six to eight feet wide, to allow for ease in moving records and equipment. Aisles between rows of shelves should measure 30 to 36 inches in width. Open space must also be preserved around elevators and stairs to allow freedom of movement.

Mobile shelving configurations are not recommended as viable options for ordinary storage needs because implementation and maintenance can be far more expensive than conventional configurations. Moreover, mobile shelving requires greater floor load capacity, and it creates access restrictions which do not occur with standard configurations.

Sometimes, a government entity will choose to convert an existing building or retrofit an area within an existing building, and consequently floor space may be severely limited. In such a case, mobile

shelving configurations can be considered.

Equipment

Equipment used within a records center can include but it not limited to, hand trucks, carts, conveyors, fork lifts, elevators, ladders and hydraulic lifts. Rubber wheels reduce noise and minimize wear on the floor, especially on catwalk grating. Equipment type depends upon a buidling's physical characeristics and shelving configuration.

Standard, cubic foot records cartons make the best use of shelf space and provide for ease and safety in handling. All specifications provided for shelving and space ratios involve use of standard cartons. It is not recommended that public agencies use any other carton. Transfer file boxes, or transfiles, can be expensive and excessively heavy and, because of their design, they cannot be stacked safely without collapsing or compressing.

Building Conversions

While most of the concerns of converting an existing structure into a records storage center are identical to those of new construction (see page 7), a few require added emphais. Counties considering converting a building should:

1. **Secure a stress test** of the floor by a competent engineer,
2. **Study original and existing floor plans** to determine the feasibility of the conversion, and
3. **Estimate total costs** of conversions and compare costs of other options.

Retrofitting an Area of a Building

These concerns are the same as those indicated in the conversion of an existing building. This option is primarily recommended for smaller counties with low volumes of records. However, the creation of records storage areas should only be undertaken after a county or municipality has projected its growth rate and estimated a reasonable rate of increase for its records, so that the costs of retrofitting are not spent unnecessarily due to a future need for construction.

In some cases, the basic benefits of semi-current records storage can be accomplished by minimal retrofitting:

1. **Removal** of semi-current records from prime office space, and
2. **Transfer** in numbered records center boxes to random storage on steel shelves in a suitable space in a existing government building.

The major concern of such a minimal arrangement is to ensure that the care given to semi-current records is sufficient to provide for their continuing protection and ease of reference. This includes security form fire and flood. Local governments should be assured that records storage yields

savings of tax dollars and improvements in safety and efficiency regardless of the current volume of their record holdings, and irrespective of its size or number of employees.

Leasing "Common" Commercial Storage Space

Another minimal arrangement to provide semi-current storage is to simply lease "common" commercial storage space. This is probably the least effective of all of the options since it requires the use of space that is not designed for economical records storage nor for efficient retrieval. As such, it is most typically used as a temporary storage option pending construction or retrofitting of a permanent space. Moreover, because of its disadvantages, this is usually the most labor-intensive of the storage options, and the most likely to encounter severe problems.

Contracting a Service Bureau

Use of a commercial records storage firm can provide a local government with an option for storing its semi-current records without the expenses of design and construction, and consequent needs to equip, maintain and staff a facility. As with any consideration to use a private vendor for services, counties must examine their long-range costs and budgetary levels, project their rates of growth in active files and compare alternatives.

Contracting with a commercial firm to transfer semi-current records out of office space can secure economies in space and equipment usage and may be preferable to no form of records storage at all. However, using a private service company may only be a cost-effective alternative if a local government is certain that its reference rates will be minimal. Although private storage services generally charge very little for storage itself, they do charge extra for all other services, e.g., trucking, receiving, handling, reference, and destruction.

In fact, it is possible to spend much more money for a year's reference charges than for annual storage. Given these considerations, other methods of records storage will probably be more economical in the long term. Division analysts are available to assist in developing guidelines for such vendor services and to aid in evaluating vendor proposals.

Summary

Records storage is made possible by the successful completion of records inventories which identify records, their accumulations, locations and rates of activity. Inventories, in turn, form the basis for records retention and disposition schedules. Retention schedules designate when a record may be transferred and disposed.

Once records are identified as semi-current, i.e. referred to less than once per month per cubic foot, they are placed in standard records boxes. Standard cartons hold approximately one cubic foot of records, weigh between 30-35 pounds, and are packed to maximize space, allow removal for reference and minimize chance of spills.

Records are then transferred to a semi-current records storage system -- i.e., a records storage center that uses a centralized, indexed procedure of numbered, randomly-placed, standard cartons on steel shelves. In the preferred, formal arrangement, county storage center staff screen requests for access and provide reference services to duly authorized officials. Such services include prompt delivery of originals or duplicates of requested records, as well as telephone or fax service when appropriate. In an informal arrangement, current staff are responsible for semi-current storage in addition to their other duties.

Storage is accomplished by constructing a new building, converting an existing building, retrofitting an existing area, leasing "common" commercial storage space, or by contracting with a vendor.

Timely and consistent transfer of appropriate semi-current records to storage results in economies in costs for real estate, equipment and supplies, as well as in increased efficiency in active files management. Aiding county officials and their staff with records storage considerations is the work of the Records Storage Section of the division. The section offers assistance in semi-current records storage to county and municipal governments.

To obtain assistance, call the Bureau of Records Management at (609) 530-3222, or write: New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management, 2300 Stuyvesant Avenue, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey, 08625.